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Opus 138

Rec.3

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beethoven  
OVERTURES  
maazel

LEONORE OVERTURES 1, 2 & 3  
FIDELIO OVERTURE

WITH  
THE ISRAEL PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

RD 6-0188

London

CS 6328

—TONY ROLLO

LONDON



BEETHOVEN  
OVERTURES  
MAAZEL

NORTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY

BEETHOVEN  
OVERTURES  
MAAZEL

# BEETHOVEN OVERTURES

Side One

LEONORE No. 1 Op. 138  
LEONORE No. 2 Op. 72A

## Lorin Maazel

Side Two

LEONORE No. 3 Op. 72A  
FIDELIO Op. 72B

conducting the

## ISRAEL PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

At the beginning of 1804, Emanuel Schikaneder, then manager of the Theater an der Wien, commissioned Beethoven to write an opera. This was somewhat surprising, as Beethoven had no experience in that field, but it was probably the result of a Beethoven concert that had taken place at the same theatre in April 1803. This concert had included the oratorio *Christus am Oelberge* which had not actually been received very well, critics almost unanimously making the point that it was too secular and too theatrical. But it may have been these very points that prompted Schikaneder, himself librettist of Mozart's *Magic flute* and its first Papageno, to the notion that Beethoven had potential as a composer of opera.

By this time Beethoven had confident achievements like the *Eroica* symphony behind him, and he shared Schikaneder's belief that he could write a great opera providing the right libretto could be found. However well-based his musical reputation, his private and emotional life was in its usual chaos and, at the time, he was in the middle of one of his many unfruitful love affairs. Beethoven's acquaintance with the Brunswick family revolved around a close friendship with Count Franz and a long, involved and impossible love affair with his sister, Countess Therese. Although class differences made marriage into the family practically impossible, Beethoven continued to get more and more involved. Temporarily spurning the love of Therese, who might well have taken the risk and married him, his affection at this time had been turned upon her sister Countess Josephine von Deym, an attractive young widow with four children and a load of debt. Josephine, on her part, had never any intention of marrying a proletarian composer of uncertain temper and fortune. The temporary and not too painful pangs caused by the failure of this abortive affair may have been reflected, as some writers surmise, in the passionate theme chosen for the opera he was writing. But even if there was no direct emotional connection between Josephine and Leonore, the heroine of the opera, the fires of passion were at least controlled by the hard and unremitting work that was to occupy him for the best part of two years.

*Fidelio* proved to be Beethoven's sole opera; the only time he found a libretto that took his fancy enough to urge him into work for the stage. His requirement was "something I can take up with sincerity and love". He scorned the flippant kind of story which had proved satisfactory for Mozart, and found his ideal in a German libretto by Joseph von Sonnleithner which was an adaptation and translation of *Leonore, ou l'amour conjugal* written by a Frenchman, Jean-Nicolas Bouilly for the composer Pierre Faveaux in 1798. The story concerned the devoted Leonore who nobly risked death, disguising herself as Fidelio, a jailer's assistant, in order to rescue her husband Florestan from the cell where he had been imprisoned for some mistaken political reason. A plot full of passionate heroics, reached its artistic peak in the affecting scene of reunion when the couple were finally pardoned and released. No doubt, these sentiments pleased and taunted an amorous Beethoven who always had a special affection for this opera in spite of its failure, referring to it later as his "crown of martyrdom".

*Fidelio* was first performed at the Theater an der Wien on November 20, 1805. At this time Vienna had just been occupied by French troops. As they were the only people in the city with much inclination or time for entertainment, *Fidelio's* audience was largely made up of French soldiers. It was not surprising that they failed to detect the greatness of the music beyond the obvious defects of libretto and production. *Fidelio* seemed a failure, and was withdrawn after three performances.

The overture used at this first production was the one we now know as *Leonore No. 2*. Some authorities have it that *Leonore No. 1* was written for this performance but then discarded as Beethoven thought it inadequate. This seems logical enough, and is the reason for its

numbering. But other authorities date this overture 1807 when Beethoven was preparing the opera for a new production in Prague which never materialised, and wrote it in this lighter form because the previous overtures were too heavy. Its later opus number is, however, not an reflection of even this date.

After the failure of the original production, Beethoven would have washed his hands of the whole thing, but his friends, notably Prince Lichnowsky, persuaded him, after fierce argument, to let the libretto be revised by Stephan von Breuning. Beethoven wrote a new overture, *Leonore No. 3*, and the opera was again staged at the Theater an der Wien on March 29, 1806—the result this time, two performances! Breuning commented afterwards: "Nothing, perhaps, has caused Beethoven so much vexation as this work, the value of which will be appreciated in the future... the treatment which he has received has robbed him of a great deal of pleasure in and love for the work".

Whatever its chronological position, *Leonore No. 1* is the slightest of the three and in most ways the inferior work. Starting with a dramatic *andante* it works up to an *allegro* which makes use of the theme of Florestan's aria *In des Lebens Frühlingstagen*. *Leonore No. 2* is a weightier affair altogether with a long, impressive *adagio* introduction into which, at the tenth bar, the same air, *In des Lebens Frühlingstagen* is introduced. It appears again in the main *allegro* section of the overture which moves to a powerful climax that is almost too much for the drama that follows to live up to. The same thing, but even more so, happens with *Leonore No. 3*. The same material is again used but by now Beethoven has worked it into a composition of such perfect proportion, so tense, dramatic and noble, that it has the effect of a symphonic movement and says all that the opera is to say later in a more compact and probably effective way. Whatever Beethoven had in mind when he made his revisions for the 1806 production, it was not then a desire for brevity. Whereas von Breuning, in his re-writing of the libretto, cut drastically and changed the piece from three acts to two (thereby making an even greater mess of the whole thing), Beethoven's overture was over a hundred bars longer than its predecessor and was, in effect, a dramatic prelude of a weight and substance that the opera could not comfortably carry.

The final stroke of genius that put everything to rights came in 1814. With an artistic acumen and moderation, grown with mature experience, Beethoven for the production at the Kärnthner Theater on May 23, 1814, wrote yet another overture, the one we now know as the *Fidelio* overture. This time completely fresh themes were used, none of them drawn from the opera, and a bright and commanding piece of music resulted, peremptory but impressive, first making the audience sit up in expectation and then leading them naturally and unobtrusively into the first aria of the opera. It is a compact masterpiece, as tidy as a Rossini overture, but undoubtedly Beethoven in the gallant mood of a work like the Eighth symphony.

This time *Fidelio* was comparatively well received, though not well enough to please Beethoven to whom the work was a love affair. At least, with the help of a really competent collaborator, G. F. Treitschke, *Fidelio* was put into a tidier, more dramatic and logical form compatible with a musical masterpiece—as it can now be judged with the help of the perspective that time lends. But if it had only lived in these glorious overtures which the labour of love inspired, the name of Leonore (or Fidelio) would still be an honoured one in the world of music.

Peter Gammond



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**BEETHOVEN OVERTURES**  
LEONORE No. 1 Op. 138  
LEONORE No. 2 Op. 72A  
**LORIN MAAZEL**  
conducting the  
ISRAEL PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

ZAL-5587-86



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**STEREOPHONIC**

SPEED 33-1/3 Side 2 {ZAL.5588} CS.6328

**BEETHOVEN OVERTURES**  
LEONORE No. 3 Op. 72A  
FIDELIO Op. 72B  
**LORIN MAAZEL**  
conducting the  
ISRAEL PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

ZAL-5588-5G